



March 15, 2011

CDCR Officer Saves Fellow Dad/Officer through Kidney Donation

Correctional Officer Gaston Alexander Benjamin, the single father of four young children who transports inmates at California State Prison-Los Angeles County (LAC) to medical appointments, underwent a kidney transplant at UCLA Medical Center on March 8, 2011, receiving a kidney from Calipatria State Prison (CAL) Correctional Officer Luis Hernandez.

Ken Lewis, Community Partnership Manager at LAC, heard about Benjamin's desperate need of a kidney transplant. When Lewis talked to Benjamin, the officer was weak and on dialysis.

"He seemed to have no way to go and no one to lean on," Lewis said. Lewis told him, "You're part of a bigger family," and worked with LAC Warden Brenda Cash to send a flyer to all California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) institutions about Benjamin's need for a kidney.

Lewis said it was "the first time we had sent out a flyer asking people to donate an organ."

"Tuff Teddy" and fellow father cleared to donate the gift of life

Officer Hernandez, who volunteers as "Tuff Teddy," the mascot for CDCR at kids' events such as Imperial County's "Shop with a Cop," learned from the flyer that his fellow officer might not survive without a kidney transplant. Hernandez subjected himself to a battery of tests to determine his eligibility and compatibility. In January he was cleared to donate the gift of life.

Dr. Jeffrey Veale, director of the UCLA Kidney Exchange Program, said that when relying upon deceased donors,



Doctor Veale and Correctional Officers Hernandez and Benjamin 2 days after the surgery.

someone with Benjamin's blood type usually has to wait about seven years for a match. Because of Hernandez' gift, it took only a few months from when doctors discovered Benjamin's condition during his annual physical check-up until his operation. He had no symptoms prior to that.

On Monday, February 28, Luis Hernandez and Gaston Benjamin met for the first time at UCLA Medical Center during their pre-operative appointment. The emotional encounter was witnessed by family members of both Luis and Gaston.

On March 8, Luis' kidney was successfully transplanted into Gaston. The UCLA staff stated that the transplant went well and the organ immediately began to function at the conclusion of the procedure.

"This guy is an angel."

"I am extremely proud of Luis Hernandez for his exceptional act in

donating the gift of life to Gaston Benjamin," said CAL Warden Leland McEwen.

"We are thrilled that this donor operation was a success and that Officer Benjamin's life was saved," said LAC Warden Cash. "I would also like to express our sincere gratitude to Officer Hernandez, his family, and the staff at Calipatria State Prison."

Both officers are grateful to the UCLA Medical Center staff for their skills and diligence during the successful transplant procedure.

There was widespread media coverage of the story. Before the operation, Hernandez told CBS News that he couldn't worry about what might happen to him if he lost his remaining kidney. "I can't live my life on 'what-ifs.' I had to try."

"The guy is an angel," Benjamin told CBS. "I believe there are angels on Earth, and he is one of them."